

Draft Compatibility Determination

Use: Hunting

Refuge Name: Iowa River Corridor Project, Port Louisa National Wildlife Refuge

Establishing and Acquisition Authorities:

The Iowa River Corridor Project (IRCP) is a partnership between the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (Service); Iowa Department of Natural Resources (IADNR); and the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS). The partnership was established in 1993 following the Midwest flood. Authority for land acquisition by the Service is provided under the Emergency Wetland Resources Act of 1986 (P.L. 99-645).

Authority for this partnership is provided under Chapters 107.24 and 107.30, Code of Iowa; the Migratory Bird Conservation Act of 1929 as amended (16 U.S.C. 715-715r); Migratory Bird Hunting and Conservation Stamp Act of 1934 (48 Stat. 451), as amended (16 U.S.C. 718 et seq.); the Fish and Wildlife Act of 1956 (708 Stat. 1119), as amended (16 U.S.C. 742a-742j); the Land and Water Conservation Fund Act of 1965 (16 U.S.C. 460 et seq.); National Wildlife Refuge System Administration Act of 1966, as amended (16 U.S.C. 668dd – 668ee); the Emergency Wetland Resources Act of 1986 (PL 99-645); the Emergency Supplemental Appropriations Act of 1994; and the National Wildlife Refuge System Improvement Act of 1997 (PL 105-57).

Refuge Purpose(s):

The partnership focus area is a 45 mile section of the Iowa River floodplain in Tama, Benton, and Iowa Counties that encompasses about 50,000 acres. Within this focus area the Service owns approximately 9300 acres, managed as a division of Port Louisa National Wildlife Refuge.

The 1995 Environmental Assessment and Finding of No Significant Impact for land acquisition in the Iowa River Corridor Project noted four management purposes: (1) Providing habitat for migratory birds and endangered species; (2) Improving the natural diversity of the ecosystem through restoration and protection of floodplain habitat; (3) Providing an alternative to levee reconstruction and reclaiming damaged farmland; and (4) Increasing public opportunities for outdoor recreation, such as hunting or fishing, and environmental education compatible with the preceding purposes.

The 2004 Memorandum of Understanding between the Service and IADNR describes six specific goals for the IRCP: (1) Provide IRCP landowners with a broad menu of assistance options that represent sound floodplain management including fee-title and easement acquisition; (2) Manage public lands and easements to provide for the natural diversity and functions of the Iowa River System; (3) Utilize the characteristics of the floodplain to improve the Iowa River water quality for fish and wildlife; (4) Provide an interpretive opportunity to illustrate floodplain system management; (5) Demonstrate and illustrate the economic outcomes of alternative floodplain management and land uses; and (6) Utilize private and public partnerships to the fullest extent of each agency's resources to accomplish the objectives.

In addition, most refuge lands in the IRCP overlay USDA wetland easements. Hunting and fishing are allowed on those easements.

National Wildlife Refuge System Mission:

"The mission of the National Wildlife Refuge System is to administer a national network of lands and waters for the conservation, management, and where appropriate, restoration of the fish, wildlife, and plant resources and their habitats within the United States for the benefit of present and future generations of Americans."

Description of Use:

What is the use? Allow IRCP visitors to hunt certain wildlife species according to state seasons and regulations with some refuge-specific regulations.

Is the use a priority public use? Hunting is a priority public use of the National Wildlife Refuge System under the National Wildlife Refuge Improvement Act of 1997.

Where is the use conducted? Public hunting for certain species is an existing use that occurs throughout the IRCP on Service fee title land, adjacent federal easement property, state land, and private property. The IRCP lies within the state's Otter Creek and Coralville Wildlife Management Units.

How would the use be conducted? Bag limits and harvest methods for authorized species are consistent with Iowa State regulations, except when more restrictive refuge regulations apply. Hunting is allowed for the following species: big game (white-tailed deer and wild turkey); migratory birds (ducks and geese, coots and gallinules, sora and Virginia rails, doves, woodcock, snipe, and crows); upland game (ring-necked pheasant, bobwhite quail, grey and fox squirrel, and cottontail rabbit); and furbearing game animals (coyote, fox, and raccoon). Currently 100% of the IRCP is open to hunting for these species.

When is the use conducted? Season dates, bag limits, and harvest methods are generally consistent with state regulations, with a few Refuge-specific regulations. Dates and times will vary depending on species. Times of day are according to regulations for each allowed species. Season information can be found at

<http://www.iowadnr.gov/portals/idnr/uploads/Hunting/huntingregs.pdf>

Why is the use being proposed? Hunting is a priority public use of the Refuge System that is also an important wildlife management tool. The Service recognizes hunting as a healthy, traditional outdoor pastime, deeply rooted in the American heritage (USFWS 2006). Hunting can instill a unique understanding and appreciation of wildlife, their behavior, and their habitat needs.

Hunting programs can promote understanding and appreciation of natural resources and their management on lands and waters in the Refuge System. Hunting is an existing use on the IRCP, and was determined a compatible use on several divisions of Port Louisa National Wildlife Refuge in 2005. In order to promote consistent regulation of hunting across the IRCP partner lands and private lands, a hunt plan and environmental assessment have been prepared.

Availability of Resources:

The designated areas open to public hunting are open in accordance with state and refuge regulations and do not require preparation and administration of special hunts. The area is popular for hunting pheasants, deer, and turkeys. Except for localized areas on the opening day of firearms deer season, crowding has not been an issue as sufficient resources appear to exist to accommodate the current level of participation and provide a quality hunting experience.

Hunters use the existing network of roads to access areas open to hunting. Parking lots, and signs are provided by the refuge for use by hunters, and boat ramps are provided by the Iowa DNR. The DNR also provides staff and volunteers to maintain these facilities and disseminate information to visitors. The main point of contact for visitors is the DNR office at the Otter Creek wildlife unit. Additional parking lots and boat ramps are provided by other agencies, local units of government, or private interests. Hunters residing next to the refuge boundary are often able to access open hunting areas from their property. Refuge law enforcement officers and state conservation officers enforce state and refuge hunting regulations.

Adequate resources are available to manage the existing hunting program at the current level of participation. Addition or improvement of facilities would require additional funds.

Anticipated Impacts of the Use:

Short-term impacts: As an ongoing activity throughout the IRCP, accommodating this wildlife-dependent use is expected to result in minimal impacts. Although hunting causes mortality to wildlife, season dates and bag limits are set with the long-term health of populations in mind. Populations of certain species, for example white-tailed deer, are monitored by the Iowa DNR. Survey information indicates that a limited harvest will not adversely affect the overall deer population level. Without harvest, deer will quickly overpopulate an area causing degradation to the quality and quantity of vegetation. Therefore, deer hunting promotes a healthier, more robust, and diverse Refuge plant community. Deer hunting may also reduce the number of deer/car collisions on adjacent highways.

Disturbance to wildlife may also result from hunting activity. This disturbance is expected to be limited in scope and duration. Dogs are permitted for hunting for retrieving and trailing. At present levels of use dogs used for these purposes are not expected to adversely impact non-target species or conflict with other uses. All motor vehicle use is restricted to designated roads, trails, and parking areas which reduces disturbance to wildlife. Disturbance to habitat is minimal given the nature of this hunting and restriction of vehicle use.

Hunters occasionally violate regulations, such as exceeding the daily bag limit, using permanent tree stands, or hunting in the wrong area. However, these incidents usually have only minor impacts to wildlife populations or refuge resources.

Long-term impacts: With maintenance of continued population monitoring by federal and state agencies, no long-term negative impacts to wildlife are anticipated. By maintaining this priority public use over the long term, state and local economic benefits would be expected to be stable or improve.

Cumulative impacts: There are no anticipated cumulative negative impacts. Cumulative positive impacts include wildlife population stability, and in particular a positive response from refuge

plant communities with deer harvest. Within the entire IRCP area, harvest on the Refuge would be limited and would fall within the state's population management goals which are based on the best available information each year. Economic benefits from wildlife-associated recreation, including hunting, are reported every 5 years by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (2011). For Iowa, total expenditures for hunting increased from \$288,324,000 in 2006 to \$405,451,000 in 2011. Maintaining and expanding opportunities to hunt are expected to have positive cumulative effects on the economy at multiple scales.

Other uses that may occur on these lands are fishing, wildlife observation, hiking, environmental education and routine management. These uses are generally spread out over the entire area such that they are not all occurring at the same time and place. Therefore, little cumulative impacts are expected from other uses.

This activity has shown no assessable environmental impact to the refuge, its habitats or wildlife species. Concerns primarily center on the possibility of impacting sensitive non-target species through excessive disturbance. Visitor safety and law enforcement issues are also important. Providing restrictions that limit access to specific locations on the Refuge will minimize disturbance and unsafe vehicle access. Disturbance to wildlife is limited to occasional flushing of non-target species during the open hunting season. The hunt follows all applicable laws, regulations and policies; including, 50 CFR, National Wildlife Refuge System Manual, National Wildlife Refuge System Administration Act, National Wildlife Refuge System goals and objectives, and Port Louisa NWR goals and objectives. This activity is also compliant with the purpose of the refuge and the National Wildlife Refuge System Mission. Operating this activity does not alter the Refuge's ability to meet habitat goals, provides for the safety of the area's citizens, and supports several of the primary objectives of the Refuge.

Public Review and Comment:

This compatibility determination will be available for a 30 day comment period together with the IRCP hunt environmental assessment. A notice was sent to local newspapers and posted at the Refuge office and DNR office.

Determination:

☐ Use is Not Compatible

☒ Use is Compatible with Following Stipulations

Stipulations Necessary to Ensure Compatibility:

To ensure compatibility with IRCP and refuge purposes and the mission of the National Wildlife Refuge System, hunting can occur on the Refuge if the following stipulations are met:

1. This use must be conducted in accordance with state and federal regulations, and special refuge regulations published in the Federal Register.
2. Populations will be monitored by the Iowa DNR to ensure a healthy population exists that may be removed without depleting the resource below a point of normal recruitment/recovery.

3. Law enforcement patrols will be conducted by state and federal officers to ensure compliance with hunting regulations and refuge special use regulations.
4. Any hunting program may be canceled if, in the judgment of the refuge manager, it causes disturbance to wildlife populations, or harm to other resources beyond that associated with normal entry/access to the area.
5. Litter will be collected, as necessary, by refuge staff and/or volunteers. Special signs will be erected where necessary, to provide information to hunters regarding regulations, boundaries and closed areas.
6. Hunting may be more restrictive than state seasons and regulations to ensure compliance with visitor safety and to reduce wildlife disturbance.
7. Vehicle use is prohibited including the use of snowmobiles and all terrain and utility terrain vehicles (ATV/UTV).
8. The construction or use of permanent binds, stands or scaffolds is prohibited. All personal property, including but not limited to stands, temporary blinds, platforms, and ladders must be removed at the end of each day's hunt.

Justification:

Hunting seasons and bag limits are established by the states and generally adopted by the Refuge, including the IRCP. These restrictions ensure the continued well-being of overall populations of game animals. Hunting does result in the taking of many individuals within the overall population, but restrictions are designed to safeguard an adequate breeding population from year to year. Specific Refuge regulations address equity and quality of opportunity for hunters, and help safeguard Refuge and IRCP habitat. Disturbance to other fish and wildlife does occur, but this disturbance is generally short-term and adequate habitat occurs in adjacent areas. Loss of plants from boat or foot traffic is minor, or temporary, since hunting occurs mainly after the growing season.

Conflicts between hunters are localized and are addressed through law enforcement, public education, and continuous review and updating to state and refuge hunting regulations. Conflicts between other various user groups are minor given the season of the year for hunting and the location of most hunting away from public use facilities.

Stipulations above will ensure proper control of the means of use and provide management flexibility should detrimental impacts develop. Allowing this use also furthers the mission of the National Wildlife Refuge System by promoting a priority public use and by providing renewable resources for the benefit of the American public while conserving fish, wildlife, and plant resources on the Refuge.

References

- U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service. 2006. Wildlife-Dependent Recreation: Hunting. 605 FW 2. National Wildlife Refuge System, Department of Interior. Available URL: <http://www.fws.gov/policy/605fw2.html>
- U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. 2011. 2011 National Survey of hunting, fishing, and wildlife-associated recreation.

Refuge Manager:

Catherine J. Henry	Date
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Concurrence:

Kevin Foerster, Refuge Supervisor	Date
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Regional Chief:

Tom Worthington, Acting Refuge Chief	Date
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Mandatory 10-or 15 year Re-evaluations Date: 2022